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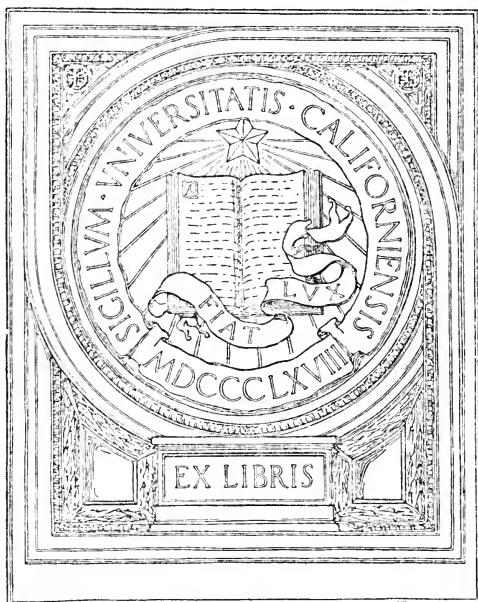


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HISTORY AND THEOLOGY

An Address

*Delivered before the Presbyterian Ministers'
Association of Philadelphia
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CALIFORNIA
BY THE

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TO VINH
AIRPORT

HISTORY AND THEOLOGY.

MR. PRESIDENT AND BRETHREN:

It is my privilege to be a student of Church History, and it will not cause surprise, I am sure, nor will it be deemed out of place if I improve the opportunity afforded by your courteous invitation to address you upon a subject suggested by my chosen line of work. I do not propose to bring before you any particular movement or person or period. It is my desire rather to speak on a more general question connected with the nature of Church History, a preliminary question of principle and method, the bearing of which, I believe, needs to be generally understood before Church History can assert its true place and accomplish its best work. That question concerns the relation of History and Theology, or more precisely of Historical Theology and Dogmatic Theology. The theme of my address, therefore, may be stated in somewhat vague and general terms, but with sufficient accuracy for all practical purposes, as

HISTORY AND THEOLOGY.

One whose attention has been called to it, can hardly fail to be impressed, as he reads the older books on Church History, with the fact that the

distinction between two time-honored and important branches of theological study, Church History and Dogmatic Theology, has not been always clearly apprehended or fully understood.

It would seem at first glance as if they were sufficiently unlike to insure their being kept separate and distinct, and of course, so far as Church History deals with mere external events and movements, there is comparatively little reason to fear for its independence and integrity as a theological discipline. But when it comes to the realm of thought or doctrine, a realm which constitutes a very large part of the domain of Church History, the past has shown that there is decided danger that the history will lose its real character and take on more or less of the aspect of Dogmatic Theology to the serious detriment of all the interests involved. Every one will admit that there is a difference between the history of theology and Systematic or Dogmatic Theology, but it is clear enough that there is more or less uncertainty as to what that difference is. And though few would deny abstractly that it is one thing to study theology as an historian, and another thing to study it as a dogmatician, as a matter of fact a great many look for the same results from the investigations of both, and if they do not demand that the dogmatician shall be an historian, do demand at any rate that the historian shall be a dogmatician. And this common misconception is shared frequently even by students of history and of dogmatics, so that the confusion of the two disciplines

is promoted by the very persons who should do most to dispel it. If it were merely a question of form or of nomenclature, it would be a comparatively unimportant matter, and I certainly should not consume time in discussing it this morning, but it is a much more serious matter than appears at first sight; so serious that it demands, it seems to me, careful attention, not simply from teachers and writers, but from the clergy in general, from all in fact who are interested in theology whether on scientific or on practical grounds.

The difficulty is a double one. In the first place, the demand that historians in dealing with the thought or doctrine of the Church shall be dogmaticians instead of genuine and scientific historians, and the common tendency on the part of historians themselves to yield to the demand, prevents our obtaining an accurate and unprejudiced knowledge of the past, and thus defeats the very end of history. In the second place, the distortion and perversion of the past—which results all unconsciously—deprives the theologian of that light and guidance which he needs in order that he may be able to reach the truth and to interpret it justly and adequately to his own day and generation.

Let me then indicate the distinction between History and Theology which I have in mind, and let me then afterwards call attention more particularly to the advantages which may be expected to flow from a general recognition of and insistence upon the distinction.

History deals solely with the past and has as such no concern with the present or the future. The history of theology has as its object not to discover and understand the truth of God, but to discover and understand the thought of the Christians of the past, to learn what they have believed to be God's truth, and why they have believed it such. The historian is concerned just as much with false as with true beliefs. In fact it is not his place to pronounce upon the truth or untruth of any opinion or doctrine, though it is his right and his duty to trace its origin and development and to show, if he can, its effects in life and history. Nothing is more incompatible with the successful prosecution of historical studies than the feeling that the historian must pass judgment upon the persons and the movements which he reviews, and try them by his own ethical and theological standards, or by the ethical and theological standards of his age. In one way, to be sure, the historian is and should be a judge of the past. It is his business to be not simply an annalist, who records events as he sees them, but an intelligent observer of the general course of events, of the connections between them, of the mutual action and reaction of character upon environment, and of environment upon character, and of the causes and effects of the inner and outer phenomena which he studies. And such observation will inevitably lead him to test men and movements by their own standards; to show where they have been true or false to their own

principles, and to trace the influences external and internal which have in any way controlled or modified their development. Thus to let the persons and movements of the past reveal themselves,—thus to let them test themselves,—is a part of the historian's duty. But that is a very different thing from bringing them to the bar of the present. It is not the historian's concern whether they are right or wrong, but it is his concern to know just what their development has been, and just why it has been thus, when perhaps their fundamental principle seemed to demand that it should be otherwise. And so the historian has simply to observe and to report the past. If he would be successful in the highest sense, he must have profound insight, which enables him to look below the mere surface of events at the moving forces which lie beneath them; but still he is only an observer and reporter.

The theologian on the other hand attempts to discover the truth of God as such, that he may interpret it to his own age. He is not primarily interested in the conceptions of this or that man or period, is not primarily interested to know what other men have thought, but to know what is God's truth for the age in which he lives. The formulations of doctrine in the past have no significance to him, except as they may aid him in his search for divine truth and in his formulation of a correct doctrine for the present. He may study the past because it is fitted to throw light on the present,

and to help him solve his great problem; he *must* study the past in so far as he believes it to contain authoritative revelations of God which should control or form the basis of his own theology. But even so, he studies other ages solely for the sake of the present, and he does it not in order to understand those ages, or to understand the opinions and beliefs of other men and other times, but simply to know what he and others must believe to-day.

You say at once that theology then has a higher and more important place than history? To discover the eternal truth of God and to interpret it to our own age is a far greater and more useful thing than simply to learn what others have thought and done in other days? I freely grant that this is so. But I maintain nevertheless that history has its own independent and indispensable place. It may indeed be worth little to know the beliefs of other men unless we know whether they are true, or unless we are led by them to the discovery of the eternal truth which we must believe. But even so, history has its own place and cannot be confounded with theology without serious detriment to the latter as well as to the former.

There are those who believe that the study of geology, or astronomy, or physics is valuable only because it reveals and displays more clearly the hand of God in nature, and thus strengthens the student's religious faith and clarifies his theological knowledge. But even such persons would not claim that geology or astronomy or physics is

identical with theology, and that there should be no geologists or astronomers or physicists, but only theologians. Nor would they claim probably, that if a work on geology does not theologize or draw religious conclusions from the facts of nature, it fails to fulfill its purpose as a scientific text book or treatise. As a matter of fact, even such persons would probably see that good and true as the religious conclusions may be, they are not themselves geology, and that in putting them in his book, the author becomes for the moment a teacher of religion and not of geology. This is not to complain at all of the religious element. It may be a most excellent thing to have it in the book and in that particular book, but the two elements must be sharply distinguished or misconceptions will inevitably result and serious mischief follow. And so it is with an historical work. The business of such a work is to deal with the past and with the past exclusively. If it be a history of politics or of war or of morals or of theology, its business is to recount the past; not to discourse upon ideal politics, or upon the evils of war, or upon the proper principles of ethics or upon eternal truth in theology, but to reproduce as accurately as possible the politics, wars, morals and theology of other days. The historian may have a practical purpose in dealing with the past. He may desire to draw lessons from it for the conduct or the thinking of the present, but to draw such lessons is not to write history, nor should the lessons ever be confounded with the

history. No one would blame an historian for attempting to draw such lessons provided he realized himself, and made it clear to others, that in doing so he was acting not as an historian but as a practical statesman, or moralist, or theologian. But on the other hand no one could say that a man was *not* an historian because he refrained from drawing such lessons or because he did not incorporate them in his book. And indeed experience has shown that it is very difficult for a man to be an accurate and impartial historian if he attempts at the same time to describe the past and to draw lessons from it for the present. The needs of the present are bound more or less seriously to color his vision of the past, and it is almost impossible for him to investigate objectively and impartially and to reach just and accurate results. It is the recognition of this fact that has led modern historians to exclude so rigidly from their historical works the reflections and practical conclusions which formed so large and important a part of the older books on history. By such exclusion it is believed that true and accurate knowledge of the past can best be attained and imparted to others. And hence, by refraining from assuming the attractive and tempting rôle of the moralist or theologian, the historian really best serves ethics and theology, for so far as a knowledge of the past promotes the good of the present, a true knowledge of it must be more helpful and more healthful than a false. And the accurate knowledge which the historian attains by pursuing a strictly

scientific method and by leaving the practical bearing of his work as far as possible out of sight, the practical teacher may then make use of with a confidence and with an effect impossible under other circumstances. To blame an historian, then, because he does not draw the practical conclusions which might be drawn, or because he does not avow his own beliefs, or declare his own attitude toward the events which he narrates, is to do him an injustice, and more than that, is to promote the very spirit and tendency which he believes and which experience has shown most fatal to the writing of accurate history, and thus in the end most fatal to the learning of the truest and most helpful lessons from the past.

The difficulty upon which I have been dwelling, of confining history to its own field, and of keeping it distinct from the practical conclusions that may be drawn from it,—that is, in the sphere of religion, the difficulty of keeping history and theology distinct,—appears over and over again in connection with every period in the life of the Church; in connection, for instance, with the patristic period, during which the great œcumenical dogmas were formulated; in connection with the Reformation, when those evangelical doctrines which constitute to-day the very center of our systems, were recovered; but above all in connection with the age of Christ and his apostles when the Gospel was preached in its purity, and the foundations of our faith were laid for all time to come. The difficulty

of drawing the necessary distinction is greater in that age than in any other, and yet nowhere is it so important that the distinction should be sharply and clearly drawn. As we believe that Christ and His apostles uttered an immediate revelation of God, and as we regard their teaching as permanently normative and authoritative, it is peculiarly difficult to deal with them in a genuinely historical way, for the results of our historical investigations constitute the authoritative material of our dogmatics, and we can scarcely avoid a dogmatic bias and interest. Moreover, the devout reverence with which every Christian heart regards not only the divine Master but also His chosen apostles, makes one shrink from thinking of them as historical figures, and from investigating their words and works as one investigates the words and works of ordinary uninspired men. And yet, no one's life or words or works can be understood, not even the life and words and works of Christ and His apostles, unless He is studied historically. And certainly nowhere in all history is an accurate understanding more important than just here; for not simply our theology, but our whole faith and life are dependent upon the Lord Christ and after Him upon the apostles, His witnesses.

It has always been a temptation to study Christ and His apostles dogmatically instead of historically; to go to them not with the desire to understand them as they were, but with the desire to have our own beliefs confirmed, or at best to get

an answer from them as to the truth of this or that element in our systems. And so men have been all too apt, if not to read into the apostles' teachings their own beliefs, at any rate to construct systems of other proportions and so of other tendencies than theirs. But if we would be historians and try to understand them, we must divest ourselves temporarily, however difficult that may be, of the theological attitude of mind, must forget momentarily that their teachings are absolutely authoritative, that thus we may study them without undue bias, and may not be tempted to force upon them under the pressure of our own theologies, conceptions which were possibly far from their thought. It is only after we have honestly and conscientiously tried to do this, after we have studied them in the purely historic spirit, that we or others are prepared to use the results so gained in shaping the theology of our own age, which we must strive always to keep in true conformity with the theology of Christ and His apostles. Thus the historical method in studying the Master and His messengers is absolutely essential as a basis for a true Christian theology. We must first be historians and only afterward theologians, and just in proportion as we confound the two methods, are we in danger of misunderstanding those whom we study, and making our theology something else than truly Christian. Historians, of course, are fallible like other men, and they make many and sometimes serious mistakes. But such mistakes do not show that the historical method is

a bad thing. They show only that the historian has not used the method rightly, or has misunderstood the actual results secured. And, admitting all the mistakes, the longer and more earnestly genuine historical study is carried on, the nearer will be the approximation to the real truth.

Another vital distinction between history and theology appears with especial clearness in connection with the study of the earliest days of the Church. To the theologian the teaching of Christ and His apostles is normative and authoritative because it is revealed truth, and the question as to how the truth was revealed does not concern him. It is divine truth however and whenever the knowledge of it was imparted. But the historian, who is not looking for truth which must be believed to-day, but is seeking to understand Christ and His apostles, cannot rest with the mere knowledge of what they believed and taught, but must go further back and ask how and under what circumstances they reached their beliefs, and how and under what circumstances they imparted them to others. And hence, it is his duty as an historian, to study the environment in which they lived, the views and the tendencies of the people with whom they came in contact, the conceptions of the nation from which they sprang, all the external forces and influences which acted upon them, as well as their inner spiritual experiences, so far as those experiences can be traced. This is not because the historian does not believe in revelation, or because he does not

believe in the divine sonship of Christ and in the inspiration of His apostles, but because he wishes to understand them and can understand them only as he traces the development of their thought and life—the only way that any one can be understood. Of course, if it be denied that they had any development, if it be denied that they felt the influence of their environment, or that they passed through spiritual experiences which left their impress on their life and thought, the historian cannot deal with them except to record their words and deeds. But as a matter of fact it is impossible thus to put either Christ or the apostles entirely outside the pale of human history. That Jesus was the eternal Son of God—very God of very God—we all believe and confess; and that His apostles were His inspired messengers to the world we are firmly convinced. But even so, the New Testament records themselves tell us of the early ignorance and the gradual enlightenment of the apostles; of the difficulty which the Saviour often had in convincing them of the truth and of His promise to give them larger knowledge through His Spirit after His departure. And the Gospel tells us that the Master himself grew in wisdom as well as in stature. And so the Christian historian endeavors to discover the influences both within and without, which contributed to the formation of their conceptions, and to trace the development of those conceptions as accurately as possible. But such a course does not mean at all that he questions the absolute deity of the

Lord, or that he doubts the inspiration of his apostles.

What is revelation? Is it necessarily and always a mechanical and external impartation of truth for which the recipient has not been in any way prepared by his previous training and experience? Or is it not at least sometimes such an influence of God upon the mind and heart and life of man that he is led to see and understand the truth that God would have him know? Does the truth cease to be revealed truth if it is given through a man's inspired experience, if he gains it by the inspired use of the powers which God has given him? No thoughtful Christian can well think such a thing. Must God act immediately and without the use of means, or not at all? When we pray and our prayers are answered, and we can ourselves trace the secondary causes through which the desired result has been attained, must we deny that God had anything to do with it? If God shall bring good out of the evil of these anxious days of war, shall we refuse to praise Him because forsooth our army and our navy manfully did their part? Ah, no! This is God's world in which we live. His are its forces, His its laws; and shall He not use His own? And these minds and hearts of ours are not they also from God and shall He not use their powers and faculties which He Himself created in communicating with the children whom He made? Can He not teach them His truth and will by laying His hand upon their lives and moulding their

spiritual experiences? It is difficult to understand how any one can suppose that to trace an apostle's belief back to his Christian experience is to deny that the truths which he teaches were revealed to him by God. Such a supposition involves an incredibly low and narrow view of God's dealings with His children.

And what is true of the apostles is true in even larger measure and in a unique way of Christ. For He is Himself God, and it is not that another being reveals truth to Him, but that His own divine nature so controls the experiences of His life that His human mind and heart learns from those experiences, learns out of the fullness of His own divine-human consciousness the truth of God as no one else could learn it. It is not necessary to suppose that all the laws of human nature were done away in Christ because He was God as well as man. Only a docetist could deny that He had a human mind, human perceptive powers, human memory, reflection, judgment, reason; and if He had all these human faculties, He must have used them and must have gained His knowledge through them—must have learned divine lessons day by day under the instruction of His own divine-human experience. Is any higher or purer source of knowledge conceivable than the experience of the God-man? And could experience and wisdom gained thus be anything else than divine? And so, if the historian, who studies the teaching of the apostles, would be true to his calling, he must trace their teaching

back to the experiences of their Christian life, of their life inspired by its contact with the divine Master Himself and by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit after His ascension; and similarly in studying the teachings of Christ, he must trace them back so far as he can to the inspired life of the God-man.

And that the historian should thus seek to trace the development of the revelation of God through the divine Saviour Christ and through His apostles, is not because of curiosity merely, not because of his desire to fathom secrets which concern neither him nor his fellows. Indeed in no way can he render greater service to the theologian and through him to the Church, than by just such reverent and careful search. For though to the theologian, who wishes to know simply what we must now believe, the important thing is not how the revelation came, but what it was, nevertheless a knowledge of how and when it was given (if such a knowledge be possible) will greatly aid him in discovering its true meaning. Everybody admits that many a text of Scripture, or parable of Christ, or statement of an apostle, cannot be fully understood and appreciated until something is known of the context or of the circumstances under which the words were uttered; and it is equally true that the truth revealed by Christ, and by the Spirit through the apostles, can be fully understood only when its relation to their own life and experience is known at least in part. Could we enter more deeply than we can, with the ignorance and weak-

ness of our sin-darkened minds, into the secret recesses of the divine Saviour's inner life, much that is now dark to us would doubtless be plain, and many of His words would glow before our enlightened eyes with even a more glorious radiance than they now possess.

Thus the ultimate fruit of a truly historical study of Christ and His apostles should be a clarification of the theologian's vision, and he should be able, because of it, to give to the world a truer and more adequate theology. Not necessarily that his theology will contain doctrines which he never held before, and that doctrines which be once believed will disappear from his system, but that all his theology will be more accurately squared to that of Christ and His apostles, will bear more nearly the proportions of their thinking (for proportion is after all one of the chief differences between theologies), will emphasize what they emphasized and will be based upon and take its meaning from the same vital principle around which their thought centered. And this is not simply a supposition as to what might be or will be, but it is to a large extent already a realized fact. Why is it that in these modern days the Church is increasingly emphasizing the great ethical and religious principles which were the moving power in the life and work of Christ and His apostles? It is largely because of the immense emphasis which has been laid during the last forty years upon the historical study of the Lord Himself and of His early disciples.

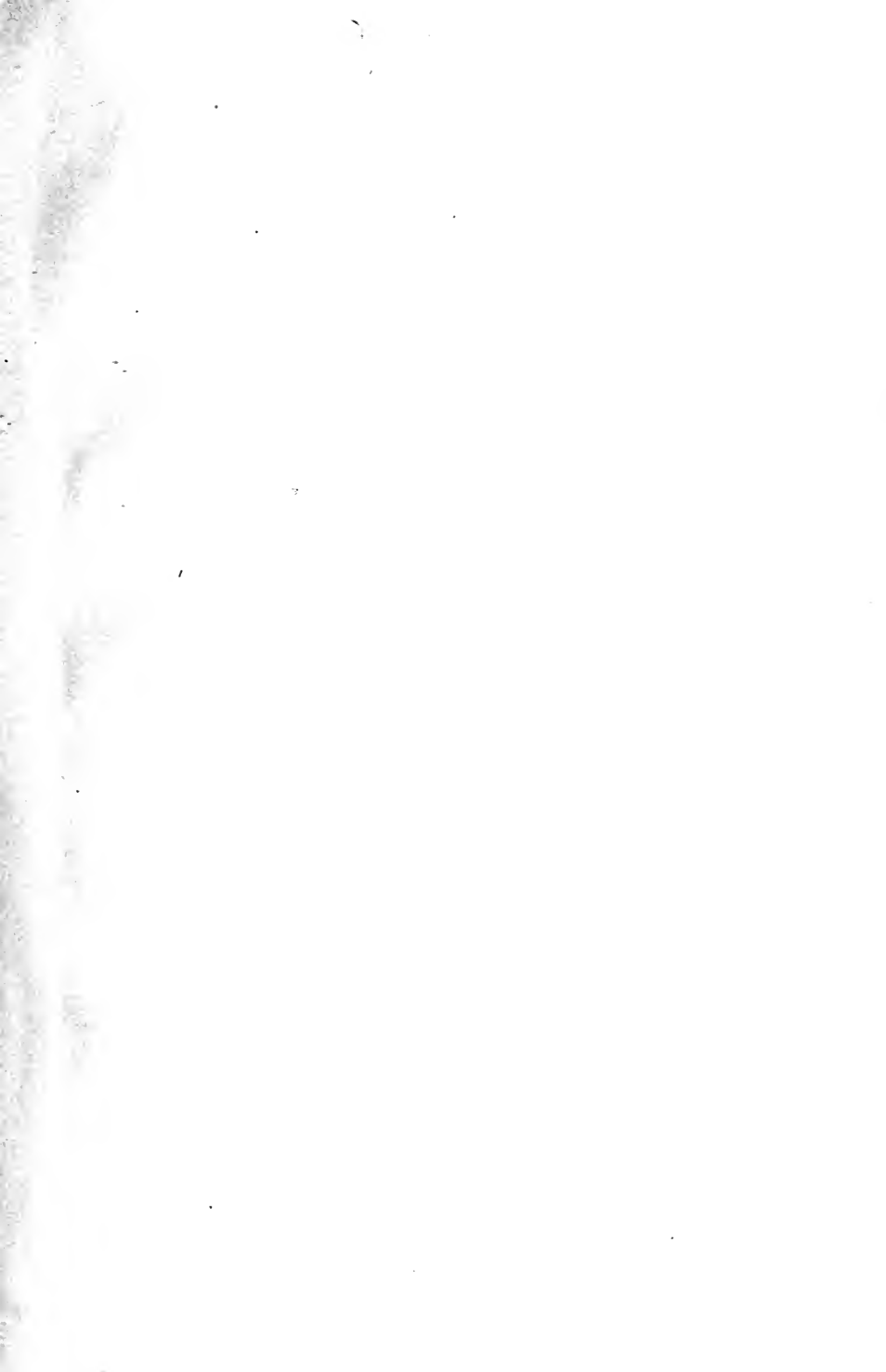
There has never been an age since the days of the apostles when Jesus Christ was so well known, and the vital and eternal significance of His life and of His teaching so widely and profoundly appreciated as now. From the second century on He has been, except for rare and beautiful intervals (which mark the history of the Church like oases in the desert) little more than a vague and abstract figure—the divine Logos, the incarnation of the Son of God, one person in two natures, the atoning Lamb of God—all of which He truly is but none of which expresses all He is. In the age of St. Bernard and the Crusades, in the age of Peter Waldo and St. Francis of Assisi, in the age of Luther and the other Reformers Jesus was recovered in the beauty and loveliness of His divine manhood, as He walked the hills and vales of Palestine, teaching divine wisdom and performing mighty works, as He suffered and died for the sins of the world, as He rose victorious over death and the grave, and ascended into heaven in all the fullness of His personal life. And the recovery of the Lord, whose figure had been so largely hidden by philosophy, by Mariolatry, by sacramentarianism, meant in every case a revival of religion which swept the Christian world. We know what the Reformation was; we hardly know perhaps how much those great revivals meant which followed upon the preaching of St. Bernard and of St. Francis. History has borne repeated witness to the revivifying power of the historic figure of Jesus Christ, and it will bear such

witness again when the new enthusiasm for that august and holy and tender and divine man shall clear away entirely the mists of scholasticism and of mysticism which have too often and too widely dimmed and obscured the world's vision of Him.

I am not speaking vain or random words. I verily believe, that standing on the threshold of the new century we are upon the eve of one of the greatest and most profound religious revivals the world has seen, for it is Christ Himself, the historic Christ who lived and labored and died, the ever-living Christ who came forth from the tomb and is now at the right hand of the Father,—it is the Lord Christ Himself who through the Spirit controls and moves the Church and the world. And there is no doubt that Jesus Christ, the concrete, individual, personal Christ, is more thought about and talked about to-day, and is more widely and more fully understood than ever before since apostolic days. Through all the centuries and until our own day, lives of Christ, books about Christ, tales laid in the time of Christ, were the rarest kind of literature, and as for any interest in the actual concurrences of His daily life and in the real development of His character, except at certain periods, there was none at all. But to-day the press is pouring forth books of all sorts, dealing in one way or another with the life and times of Jesus—good books, bad books and indifferent books; and the recovery of a mere fragment of papyrus, purporting to contain hitherto

unknown utterances of our Lord, and the publication of other even less authentic documents, is sufficient to throw the whole world into a fever of excitement. We may not like all the books that have been written,—some of them no reverent man could like,—but they are all, whatever their tone and their quality, symptomatic of a profound and universal interest in Jesus Christ, which has been fostered in no small degree by the historical enthusiasm and investigations of the last few decades, and which cannot help but produce tremendous effects in days to come. For if Christ but be known, the human heart must ultimately own Him as its Lord.

There is much more that I should have liked to say upon my general subject of the distinction between History and Theology, but I have already trespassed too long upon your patience, and there is perhaps no better point at which to close than just here, with the utterance of my profound conviction that the historical study of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is really only in its infancy, but which is pursued to-day in all parts of Christendom with a new zeal and with a devotion and a purity of purpose that have never been surpassed, in spite of all mistakes and errors, is bound to hasten the coming of His blessed kingdom, the coming of the time when all the world shall know and love and serve the God of Hosts and His Son Jesus Christ, our Divine Master and Saviour and Lord.



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